Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences in Relation to Art Education

Jessica Foster
St. Edward's University

Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences has implications in art education, though for reasons that may not seem obvious at first. Gardner's theory suggests that individuals may possess many different kinds of intelligence, including the following; linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Because each student possesses different strengths and weaknesses, according to Gardner, it is recommended that teachers "present content in ways that capitalize on as many different intelligences as possible and help students understand their strengths and weaknesses in each" (Eggen & Kauchak, 2012, p. 141). Though Gardner did admit that "not all topics can be adapted for each intelligence," I have outlined ways to incorporate art education at the middle school level into each intelligence. In an article by Gardner himself titled "Project Zero: Nelson Goodman's Legacy in Arts Education," (2000) he critiques the art education pedagogy of the 1970's by stating, "talk of arts focused very much on emotions, spirit, mystery, the ineffable and unanalyzable. An effort to demystify the arts, to construe them as involving the same kinds of skills and capacities as are involved in other domains and other disciplines, was incendiary" (p. 247). I believe the arts are very much an emotional and spiritual outlet, however, I also believe that as a teacher there must be clear analyzable skills, concepts, and goals for student achievement. Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences helps students of all strengths and weaknesses explore the arts, not simply the creatively inclined.

The first intelligence, linguistic, has a few connections to art. In an article by Gardner (1988) titled, "Toward More Effective Arts Education," he argues that there are many similarities to the arts and linguistics by noting that educators must view the arts as, "involving the use of certain sets of symbols in certain ways - for example, attending to fine details in a symbolic pattern... an individual who would

participate actively in the artistic process must learn to "read" and "write" in these different symbolic systems. And so arts education can be usefully viewed as the imparting of literacy skills in the area of artistic symbolization" (p. 158). It is for this reason of symbolic connections that the arts and linguistics are closely connected. One way to incorporate linguistics in a middle school art classroom is to ask students to creatively write a narrative to a work of art, without giving prior background information of the piece or of the artist who created it. Conversely, students could also create a piece of artwork in response to a favorite book or poem in conjunction with their language arts class.

The logical-mathematical intelligence could be incorporated through the study of fractal art, defined as, "a form of algorithmic art created by calculating fractal objects and representing the calculation results as still image" (Fractal, 2012, p.1). Though the algorithms used to generate fractal art are most likely too advanced for the middle school grade levels, fractal art can easily be studied and appreciated without comprehending the algorithms. In terms of logical thinking in art, students could make a conclusion about the meaning of a piece of artwork and defend it based on evidence from the artist's life. Another example of using logical thinking in art assignments comes from Gardner himself, suggesting the "perceptual task of discriminating an original of the *Mona Lisa* from fakes of various degrees of persuasiveness" (Gardner, 1988, p. 164).

Incorporating music into the art classroom is something I'm very passionate about and plan on using Gardner's theory to assist me in this task. The first example would occur after a unit on vocabulary used to describe art, called the Elements of Art and the Principles of Design. As a way of assessing student comprehension of vocabulary, I would lead the class in a discussion of how the vocabulary translates to music by playing different genres of music and play examples of what constitutes "good

music" and "bad music," and ask student to explain why the "good" is good and the "bad" is bad using the newly acquired vocabulary. The second example is by asking the students to practice abstract thinking in response to different kinds of music. Theoretically, metal would render a different outcome than classical music and I think middle school aged children would enjoy this assignment.

Spatial intelligence is an imperative skill in all of the fine arts, especially in still-life drawing and realistic drawing and sculpting. By assigning these types of projects, spatial intelligence can be acquired. Projects like scaling images, as outlined in my Photo Reinterpretation lesson plan, and recreating a 3-D object will result in greater spatial intelligence.

Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is most often attributed to sports, but applying it to performance art, dance, and choreography brings it into the realm of art. Though performance art and choreography are generally a separate class from general art, usually called theater arts, asking students to choreograph a performance or create a performance piece is definitely under the umbrella of "the arts." I would most likely incorporate this intelligence in my classroom by allowing students to get up and perform jumping jacks or yoga poses whenever energy levels are high and I have a sense that some students are restless. This will give bodily-kinesthetic learning the opportunity to stretch their bodies and become more focused.

Interpersonal skills will blossom during group work or assignments where students are paired up with one another. Changing table groups every so often will increase each student's interpersonal intelligence with the need to adapt to new personalities in a close space. Building classroom community with discussions, field trips, and group critiques will also allow interpersonal intelligence to grow.

Intrapersonal intelligence will most benefit from individual work time, teacher-guided

self-reflection documented in sketchbooks, and a self-critique to conclude each project. The fine arts are very personal and, as noted, an important emotional and spiritual outlet. Providing a safe, caring classroom and meaningful questionnaires will help guide students toward strengthening their intrapersonal intelligence.

Lastly, students will grow in naturalist intelligence by having the opportunity to explore art in the context of nature. Activities like sketching, sculpting, and photographing from nature will help students explore their naturalist intelligence. I also find the outdoors to be one of the best classroom environments and plan on implementing lesson plans that can occur outside either on school grounds or in another location as a field trip.

Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences is an incredibly profound tool in helping students will varying strengths and weaknesses learn. In an art classroom, virtually every intelligence can be connected to an art lesson which will result in a greater understanding and appreciation for the arts. Understanding that each student possesses intelligence helps aid in the teacher's concept of student learning and by tapping into each intelligence, more students are likely to succeed in an art classroom.

Works Cited

Eggen, P. D., & Kauchak, D. P. (2012). *Educational psychology: Windows on classrooms* (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Merrill.

Fractal art - Wikipedia. (n.d.). *Wikipedia*. Retrieved December 12, 2012, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fractal_art

Gardner, H. (1988). Toward more effective arts education. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, *22*(1), 157-167.

Gardner, H. (2000). Project zero: Nelson Goodman's legacy in arts education. *Symposium: The legacy of Nelson Goodman*, *1*(1), 245-249.